

Rules of the Game

Reading Spell Descriptions (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Players and DMs often find it remarkably difficult to agree on exactly how particular spells function in the game. In the heat of battle, exactly what a spell can do, how and where it can be cast, and even whether a saving throw is allowed can prove dreadfully tricky to pin down. What seemed clear enough when casually reading the rulebooks in quiet solitude can seem maddeningly vague when a valued player character's life hangs in the balance or when a particularly loathsome villain is about to go down to a well-deserved defeat.

When you're having difficulty figuring out a spell, just relax and consider what the spell's description actually says. This article presents a method for doing that.

In Part One, we'll examine a few key terms.

Some Key Terms

Here are a few terms used in both the game and this article to describe spells and their effects:

Aim or Aiming: The act of choosing exactly where a spell (or other magical effect) will emerge or take effect. If the spell has a target entry, you aim the spell when you choose the target. If the spell has an effect entry, you aim the spell when you decide where the effect will appear. If the spell has an area entry you aim the spell when you choose the spell's point of origin or the location that the area will cover.

Caster Level: Your level in the class that gives you access to the particular spell you're casting. In some cases, your caster level is less than your class level; if so, this is noted in the class description. For example, a paladin's caster level is one-half his paladin level. (A paladin of 3rd level or lower has no caster level at all.)

If you're multiclassed, you could have different caster levels for the spells you have by virtue of your various classes. For example, a 4th-level paladin/5th-level sorcerer has a caster level of 2 for paladin spells and a caster level of 5 for sorcerer spells. If you've taken a prestige class, your levels in that class might stack with levels in another class to determine your caster level, or they might not depending on the prestige class. Otherwise, your levels in your various spellcasting classes usually don't stack for purposes of determining your caster level.

Line of Sight: An unobstructed, straight line between two locations such that a creature at one location can see whatever is at the other. In most cases, you need line of sight to whatever or wherever you aim a spell. See the glossary entry on Page 310 of the *Player's Handbook* for information on tracing line of sight.

Line of Effect: A straight, unblocked line between two locations on the battlefield. Line of effect is just like line of sight, except that restrictions on vision don't apply.

On the other hand, some things that you can see through can block line of effect, such as a *wall of force* or an

antimagic field. Though the rules don't specifically say so, you always have line of effect to yourself.

In general, it takes a solid object to block line of effect (but immaterial things, such as *antimagic fields* can, too, as noted above). A solid object with a hole it at least 1 foot square doesn't block line of effect.

Creatures usually do not block line of effect, except for very odd creatures, such as gelatinous cubes, that can completely fill a space.

In a few cases, line of effect can turn corners (see Part Five).

Point of Origin: The point in space from which a spell's effects burst, emanate, or spread. A spell's area cannot extend to any location if line of effect from the spell's point of origin is blocked (but see Part Five).

Recipient: This is not a game term, but it is used in this article to indicate the creature, object, area, or point in space where a spell's effects are felt. If a spell is aimed at a specific creature, for example, that creature is the recipient. A spell that covers an area might have several recipients.

What's Next?

Next week, we'll consider the major parts of a spell description.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has just completed an 18-year run as the Sage of *Dragon Magazine*. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden. (Rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends.)

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